



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 2, 2018  
ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20; CANTICLE 9; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7; LUKE 3:7-18

## LOVE LETTERS

**Philippians 4:4-9** *[Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.]*

Fifty-five years ago, a US Circuit Court judge issued a blanket injunction against all “parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing and picketing.” It was a legal attempt to prevent the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from engaging its nonviolent civil rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. When King and others defied the ruling, citing it as an unjust law aimed at perpetuating oppression, they were arrested and jailed under peculiarly harsh conditions. It happened to be Good Friday.

In the days that followed, King wrote the now infamous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” on the margins of newspaper smuggled to him

by his lawyer and a trusty. He was responding to a group of clergy, including an Episcopal priest, who had acknowledged the injustice of racism and segregation, but implored King to make his case in the courts, rather than on the streets. That would be the peaceful way to proceed, they argued.

King responded by refuting their logic as angling to preserve the status quo—a pseudo-peace built upon the false notions of a segregated nation. Separate and unequal. He wrote: “I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest

respect for law."<sup>1</sup> Citing theologians from Augustine, to Aquinas, to Tillich, King argued that we have not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws and to disobey unjust ones.

It's quite remarkable how resonant his words are for us even today.

There's another letter written from jail that I want to highlight with you today—it is this Letter to the Philippians, written by St. Paul, who had been imprisoned in Rome because those in power saw him as a threat to the status quo known as Pax Romana, a pseudo-peace structured to perpetuate the separate and unequal society of the First Century.

The circumstances of its writing are equally remarkable, and worth telling. The church community in Philippi was one of the first established by Paul years earlier, and they shared a special bond. He loved them, and they loved him dearly.

So they are deeply distressed when they learn of his imprisonment, and one among them, Epaphroditus, goes to him to care for Paul. Roman prisons provided no food or care for those jailed, and people would suffer terribly and often starve as they awaited trial. Part of keeping the peace...

Epaphroditus arrives, but falls deathly ill, and he and Paul share a mutual care for one

another as he regains his strength. Paul writes a letter to his beloved friends back in Philippi, sending it with Epaphroditus who returns home.

What Paul writes is, first and foremost, a love letter really. He sets aside self-concern as a prisoner soon to be executed and offers beautiful words of endearment and encouragement to his friends. Sixteen times he exhorts them to joy, or to rejoice, because that is what they were created for, and that joy would light the path forward, even in difficult times.

He offers a simple list of practices by which they would discover the truth of life. They are worthy of our consideration even now:

- Live boldly in the face of injustice.
- Live humbly as servants of Christ in this broken hurting world.
- Live faithfully into your true identity as children of God
- Live authentically as agents of God's kingdom, which will usher in a peace which surpasses all human understanding.

He then thanks them for the gift of their witness to him, and to the world, and beseeches them to work together and trust that God is working with them as well. And rejoice, rejoice without anxiety for the trials and tribulations of this world.

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<sup>1</sup> King, Martin Luther. "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)". [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html), December 12, 2018

He blesses Epaphroditus as he takes his leave—they know they will not see each other again, and Epaphroditus delivers the letter to his church and to us even here today. It is an inspiring epistle of love and joy in the midst of grief.

The science of bereavement teaches that joy and grief are companions in the way of love. In my days as a hospice physician, I came to understand this, not as an idea, but as an existential reality—that to love another is the greatest source of joy in life, but it also means that the loss of that loved one will prompt a grief that cannot be comprehended as a rational notion only. Grief refuses to be a thought experiment. It plumbs the depths of our biopsychosocial and spiritual reality which is changed forever as a result.

And yet we love, and we long to love, because we are loved, and we are drawn into the orbit of that Source of all love, who rejoices when we rejoice, and grieves when we grieve. That is the mystery of the Incarnation written upon our hearts and writ large upon the whole of creation—that God comes among us in our joy and in our grief and dwells with us.

Both letters—King’s and Paul’s—bear witness to the love and joy and hope and sorrow and grief and loss that is the human experience, in all its brokenness and potentiality, and they bear prophetic truth for us, written for a particular audience in their own times, but offering extrapolated wisdom

and truth to us in our time. We would do well to draw on them both for inspiration.

I read both letters again this week, as I made a trip to the US-Mexican border to engage fellow Episcopalians in that region who are living boldly, humbly, faithfully, and authentically as they respond to the humanitarian crisis arising from our nation’s immigration policies.

I’m still unpacking that experience and will for some time, and Nancy Ross and I will share our experience in the coming weeks, and we will invite you into conversation about the humanitarian crisis we witnessed first-hand and how we as a community might respond, but let me say here, we saw people rejoicing and grieving in the same moment with remarkable grace. There’s a heavy weariness among the people who live along both sides of the border, and yet they also embody a spirit of resolute joy as they find their way together. I was inspired by their witness, and no wall divides them in that common experience.

I’d like to challenge each of you this week to do three things. It should take no more than an hour or two of your time.

1. Read King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* with the current immigration in mind. We will talk about it as a community on Wednesday evening January 16<sup>th</sup>. More on that later.
2. Read Paul’s short letter to the Philippians and respond to his words of encouragement by rejoicing in your

life this week, even as you may grieve with all that life brings to your doorstep. Be true to yourself.

3. Write a letter—not an email or a text—write a letter to someone whom you love, and express your thanks for their place in your life, encourage them in their path, and say what you'd say if you were never to see them again. Think of it as a love letter, as encouragement in the face of hardship, as expressing gratitude for them and their place in your life, and commend them to God who is the source of all that is good, and true, and just. Share

the letter if you want, or put it away. But speak the truth in love, because that is what you were created to do.

And then embrace the trajectory that Paul provides—to live boldly, and humbly, and faithfully and authentically, and the peace of God that surpasses human understanding will dwell in your heart and in this world all the more.

*Amen.*



*Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*